

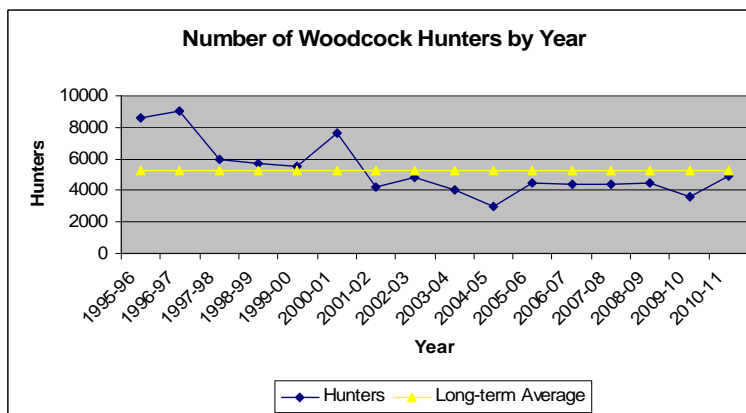
The American Woodcock

Muscles tensed, heart pounding with an adrenaline rush, head down and eyes fixed on a thicket of greenbrier and dewberry growing amid the crown of a fallen white oak, nose filled with the sweet aroma of a woodcock, the only thing your bird dog is waiting on is for the flushing of the bird and the crack of your shotgun. It's mid-December and the woodcock have returned to Louisiana!



Louisiana Woodcock Hunting

Louisiana consistently has more woodcock hunters than any other southern state. Louisiana hunters spend more days afield hunting woodcock than hunters in any other southern state and they harvested 26,000 woodcock during the 2010-2011 woodcock season. Based on annual LDWF (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries) hunter surveys, the long-term average number of woodcock hunters in the state each year is 5,300.



What makes woodcock hunting so attractive in the state of Louisiana? Great opportunities! Louisiana represents important wintering grounds for woodcock with some of the highest numbers of wintering woodcock found within the state (Straw et al. 1994). Additionally, several wildlife management areas in the state, as well as private lands, are managed to enhance woodcock habitat and woodcock hunting opportunities; this means birds and great places to hunt them.

Not only that, but studies on wintering ground habitat use on WMAs in the state provide the most up-to-date information on how to effectively manage for woodcock. As with any wildlife, numbers of woodcock are directly tied to habitat, with more individuals found in quality habitat than in poor habitats.



Natural History

The American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) is a shorebird that has forsaken the marshes for forested habitats. In the day time, woodcock prefer to spend their time in thickets



with rich moist soil within the forest. This habitat provides protective cover as well as areas where they can feed on their favorite food, earthworms. Beginning at sunset, woodcock fly to fields. These fields may be agricultural fields, pastures, clear cuts or fallow fields and are used for courtship displays and feeding. Nocturnal fields should be moist and contain patchy cover; thick, uniform ground cover is undesirable for woodcock.

Females are larger than males, with females averaging 7.3 oz. and males 5.8 oz. Female's also have longer bills (over 2 ¾ inches) than males (less than 2 ½ inches).

Food

Worms are the staple diet of the woodcock throughout the year. The woodcock uses its long bill for extracting worms from the soil. The upper mandible (bill) is flexible and the woodcock can open the tip of the bill below the soil surface to seize its prey. Woodcock have been known to eat their weight or more in earthworms within a 24 hour period.

Evidence of woodcock feeding can be seen by looking for probe holes in the soil. During dry periods, woodcock will turn over leaves with their bill and feed on slugs, sow bugs, as well as insects and their larvae.

Migration

Woodcock generally begin to depart from their northern breeding grounds in October. Woodcock occupy the wintering grounds in Louisiana from November to February with maximum numbers arriving in mid-December.



Reproduction and Nesting

There is limited nesting in the extreme southern part of the woodcock's range, which occurs from January to February. On the northern breeding grounds (where most reproduction occurs) woodcock nest from March to May. Woodcock typically lay 4 spotted eggs in a depression on the ground, often under bushes or at the base of small

trees. The female incubates the eggs for 20-21 days. The young are precocial, meaning they are able to walk within a short time of hatching and are able to feed themselves, they still need the mother to brood them, especially during inclement weather. Broods tend to break up between 6 and 8 weeks after hatching.



American woodcock management regions, breeding range, Singing-ground Survey coverage, and winter range. Figure from: Case and Associates (2010).

Population Management

Woodcock are managed on the basis of two management regions or populations, eastern and central. These regions are biologically justified because analysis of band recovery data indicate there is little crossover between regions (Cooper and Parker 2011).

Each year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with numerous partners, coordinates three surveys to assess the population status of American woodcock: 1) Singing-ground Survey, which provides an estimate of population trends, 2) Wing-collection Survey, which provides an annual index of woodcock recruitment, and 3) Harvest Information Program, which provides data on the number of hunters, harvest, and days spent afield each year. The Singing-ground Survey covers a major portion of the breeding range in Canada and the U.S., while the Wing-collection Survey and Harvest Information Program only sample U.S. hunters (Cooper and Parker 2011).

Habitat Management

Diurnal (daytime) habitat for the woodcock consists of thickets with relatively sparse ground cover up to 6 inches above the ground for easy foraging, and dense cover greater than 6 inches above the ground to provide protective overhead cover. The soils must be moist and rich containing abundant earthworms for feeding. This type of habitat can be created by making patch clearcuts of approximately 5 acres in size, small group selection

cuts within the forest, or even single tree selection. Remember the woodcock's need for moist soils. This is where habitat management needs to be conducted if woodcock are to be attracted; hard dry soils will not provide suitable habitat for woodcock.

Woodcock use nocturnal (nighttime) habitat for both courtship displays and feeding. Old fields containing patches of cover, such as brush, make good nocturnal habitat for woodcock. Nocturnal habitat can be maintained by mowing, burning, herbicides, and encouraging native shrubs. Burning can create some of the best habitat for woodcock because it removes layers of grass and dead vegetation, but will leave a few scattered stalks and patches of cover that provide concealment for feeding woodcock. Current research is being conducted on Sherburne WMA to determine what habitat management treatments create optimal nocturnal habitat for American woodcock. Dr. Jeff Duguay (LDWF) is working in conjunction with Dr. Kim Marie Tolson (University of Louisiana at Monroe) and graduate student Cody Haynes (ULM) on this project. This project was initiated in the fall of 2011 and is expected to run for 2 years. They are examining woodcock response to burning, disking, mowing, and mowing with burning.

Woodcock Hunting on Public Lands

Interested in hunting woodcock in Louisiana? There is ample woodcock hunting opportunity on public land in Louisiana. Wildlife Management Areas (WMA), Kisatchie National Forest, National Wildlife Refuges, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers land offer woodcock hunting opportunity. Woodcock distribution varies from year to year depending on soil moisture and temperature. In most years, land in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River floodplains offers the best woodcock hunting. Some of these properties include Sherburne WMA, Three Rivers WMA, Indian Bayou Area (USACOE), and Dewey Wills WMA. However, hunters should not overlook the upland areas which can offer very good hunting as well. Some of these include the Kisatchie National Forest, Clear Creek WMA, Bodcau WMA, and Sandy Hollow WMA. See <http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/wma> for WMA descriptions and locations.

Fun Fact

American woodcock have many local names, including bogsucker, Labrador twister, timber-doodle (probably the most well-known), big-eyes, blind snipe, brush snipe, swamp bat, mud bat, and so on. But in Louisiana the woodcock is known as *bécasse* (bay-Cass), this is from the French *bécassine* meaning a snipe.

Literature Cited

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